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Creating Covert Warriors

The Japanese Army's Nakano School, 1938-45

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The Imperial Japanese Army (IJA) established in 1938 an institution to train personnel in clandestine operations. The Nakano School produced some 3,000 intelligence officers in seven years. Its graduates assumed a wide variety of duties. Some joined the Army General Staff (AGS) in Tokyo as analysts. Others conducted numerous operations in China and Southeast Asia, including the "liberation" of Burma. As the war's tide turned against Japan, the school opened a branch center dedicated to producing commandos and concentrated its training on guerrilla tactics.

The school's graduates, originally expected to gather intelligence throughout the world on long-term assignments, were then ordered to lead popular guerrilla bands as part of the anticipated final battle for the Japanese home islands. The Nakano School's last commandant ordered all documentary evidence of the school destroyed and dismissed its members when Japan surrendered in August 1945.

Upgrading Covert Capabilities

Imperial Japan by late 1937 was waging war in China and preparing to fight one or more of the major powers. The Japanese Empire had been on a collision course with the Soviet Union, Great Britain, and the United States since 1931, when the IJA seized Manchuria as a forward

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base against Soviet Russia. Tokyo recognized the resulting puppet state of Manchukuo the following year. Japan, seeking to blunt the growing Nationalist Chinese challenge to its grip on Manchuria and interests throughout China, moved after fighting first broke out near the Marco Polo Bridge near Peking (Beijing) in July 1937 to resolve the issue on the battlefield.

Army officers in Japan were taking steps to upgrade clandestine capabilities. In November 1937 the IJA expanded its covert warfare weapons program, moving its 9th Technical Laboratory from Tokyo to nearby Noborito. The same month saw the birth of 8th Section (Clandestine) in AGS 2nd Bureau (Intelligence).¹ The next logical step was to create a center to train the personnel needed to conduct the operations devised in 8th Section and use the special devices developed at the Noborito Laboratory.

In December 1937 the War Ministry's Military Administration Bureau formed a preparatory committee to establish a covert operations training center. Before joining the committee, Lt. Col. Iwakuro Hideo,² a tireless advocate of intelligence, had written a memo calling for a training center as part of a program to build a more "scientific" basis for Army clandestine operations. The facility he envisioned would instruct candidates in intelligence gathering, counterintelligence (CI), covert warfare, and propaganda.³ Joining him was Lt. Col. Akikusa Shun, an expert on

Russia who had cut his teeth on covert activities as an intelligence officer in Japan's Siberian intervention of 1918-22. Lt. Col. Fukumoto Ryuji, a third member, was a CI veteran of the Kempeitai military police.

In an army notorious for "operations first" thinking that slighted intelligence, the three officers were remarkable. Iwakuro, assigned to the Japanese Embassy in Washington in the months before the attack against Pearl Harbor, gathered intelligence and conducted operations related to the negotiations between Secretary of State Cordell Hull and Amb. Nomura Kichisaburo.⁴ Following Japan's invasion of Southeast Asia, Iwakuro, as chief of his own clandestine organ, directed covert operations to overthrow British rule in India.⁵

Akikusa had joined the committee soon after working for nearly four years in the IJA's Harbin Tokumu Kikan (Special Services Organ), which oversaw the Army's anti-Soviet operations throughout Manchukuo.⁶ He would become the Nakano School's first commandant. Fukumoto would serve as his deputy and right-hand man.⁷

The three men had to overcome the initial opposition of all but a few IJA officers. Lt. Col. Usui Shigeki, chief of 2nd Bureau's Russia Section, was one of their few backers.⁸ Other intelligence officers worried the plan would end the system of overseas Army attachés directly reporting intelligence to them.⁹

Rigid career progression also posed an obstacle. Most Army intelligence officers moved through a set course: the IJA War College, initial posting to AGS, overseas study, military attaché or deputy attaché, clandestine organ chief, and 2nd Bureau section and branch chief. As commissioned officers, they were also expected at some point to command a battalion or regiment. Willing neither to promote regular officers serving overseas in long-term clandestine assignments nor to use civilians, the IJA turned to its reserve officer pool.¹⁰

Opening the School

Iwakuro, Akikusa, and Fukumoto worked throughout early 1938 to sell their proposal to top War Ministry and AGS officials. In July, 1938 reserve officers became the first class of the training center, operating in a rented building of a women's patriotic organization in Tokyo. The school then moved in March 1939 to the western suburb of Nakano. In August 1940 the center was formally inaugurated as an IJA school. Known in Tokyo as the Rear Service Personnel Training Center, the Nakano School took the covername of Eastern Unit 33.¹¹

From the start, the Nakano School housed two competing outlooks. Iwakuro, Akikusa, and Fukumoto saw the center applying the latest tools and techniques of clandestine operations to train professional intelligence officers.

But joining Akikusa and Fukumoto as the third-ranking officer was Maj. Ito Samata, an officer of a decidedly more "spiritualist" cast.

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delayed-fuse tear gas, poison gas, and other special weapons.¹⁵

Akikusa, known for his ease in mixing with Westerners, would at times take students to the top-class Imperial Hotel for meals to hone their social skills before placing them overseas. He also encouraged them to learn through self-initiative. The students, sporting civilian clothes and haircuts, were free in the evenings to go out on the town and even stay overnight.

For the school's "textbook," Akikusa turned to the secret operations reports of Col. Akashi Motojiro from the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-05. Akashi supplied funds and arms to Lenin's Bolsheviks and other anti-Tsarist movements of all stripes throughout Europe in an effort to check reinforcements to the battlefield in Manchuria by undermining Moscow. The Japanese equated his actions as equivalent to three army divisions.¹⁶

Reflecting its scientific vision, the Nakano School trained its students to speak foreign languages, break codes, wear disguises, infiltrate, use firearms, handle explosives, operate automobiles and aircraft, and use guerrilla tactics.¹³ The Inada Factory, a small campus facility run by Lt. Col. Inada Yuichi, developed devices for clandestine operations. Many instructors came from AGS 2nd Bureau's Russia and Clandestine sections.¹⁴ Members of the Noborito Laboratory also visited to offer guidance in the covert warfare devices they were developing, including pistols disguised as cigarette lighters, incendiary bricks, explosives made to resemble coal, miniature cameras mounted in briefcases and lighters,

Major Ito, a skilled swordsman rumored to have cut down more than 80 guerrillas and spies in Manchuria during the IJA's takeover in 1931, had first opposed creating the Nakano School. Once appointed to oversee the training there, however, he dedicated himself to drilling into its students a "spiritual" education. The campus featured halls where students honed their skills at traditional fencing (kendo) and such martial arts as aikido. Ninja masters were invited to impart their ancient secrets. Instructors drummed into students the spirit of endurance against all hardships to execute their missions.¹⁷ Lt. Onoda Hiro, one Nakano School graduate, displayed

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in the extreme the effects of his schooling, surrendering in the Philippines only in 1974.¹⁸ Sgt. Sakai Kiyoshi, a graduate who appeared on the remote island of Yaeyama near Taiwan late in the war as a school-teacher named Yamashita Torao, spent his evenings there teaching the children kendo and exhorting the islanders not to fear death.¹⁹

The school's clash between reason and spirit resulted in early casualties on both sides. Ito, who believed Great Britain was manipulating to its own advantage the fighting between Japan and China, decided to instigate an anti-British campaign. He conspired with two members of the Nakano School's first class to seize Great Britain's consulate in Kobe, force the officials to confess to British meddling, and find documents to prove that Japan's liberal statesmen and business leaders had been bought. Ironically, a member of the first class from Akikusa's faction detected the plot.

The Kempeitai in January 1940 arrested Ito and his followers in Kobe. The IJA quietly put Ito on the reserve list and sent the other plotters on overseas assignments in order to keep the affair quiet. Akikusa, although not involved in the plotting, took responsibility as commandant by resigning in March.²⁰

Working in Intelligence

The Nakano School's first class graduated in July 1939.²¹ AGS 2nd Bureau's Russia Section had first promoted the Nakano School as a source of recruits for its operations.

But the graduates were sent throughout the world to gather intelligence against all Japan's hypothetical enemies. The first class thus operated in Hawaii, the Philippines, the Western Hemisphere, Southeast Asia, India, and China as well as the Manchukuo-Soviet border and Europe.²² The officers posed as newspaper reporters, Chinese citizens, Buddhist priests, trading company employees, diplomats, servants, and sailors.²³

Nakano School officers also worked as analysts throughout AGS 2nd Bureau. Three officers withdrawn from their covert assignments in the Western Hemisphere and India at the onset of the war assumed new duties following US and British developments in 6th Section (USA, Britain).²⁴ Maj. Hata Masanobu, a graduate of the school's second class, served in the bureau's Russia Section.²⁵ Other graduates served in other parts of the Army Section, Imperial General Headquarters (IGHQ), in Tokyo and as staff intelligence officers in the field armies.

"Liberating" Asia

Once Japan decided to strike south against the United States and European colonies in Southeast Asia, the Nakano School's graduates worked

in a number of operations to "liberate" Asia. One of the most famous clandestine groups involved was the Minami Kikan (Southern Organ). The organization was established in February 1941 under the command of Col. Suzuki Kenji, who had first entered Burma in June 1940 to gather intelligence as a Japanese reporter named Minami Masuyo.²⁶

Most IJA members of the Minami Kikan—which also included Imperial Japanese Navy (IJN) officers, Japanese civilians with experience in Southeast Asia, and Burmese activists—were Nakano School graduates. One such officer, Capt. Kawashima Takenobu, was Colonel Suzuki's "right-hand man" in the organ, according to Nakano School classmate and fellow organ member Lt. Izumiya Tatsuro.²⁷ In the months leading to the war, the organ was training Burmese operatives, including postwar Burmese strongman Gen. Ne Win, in occupied China's Hainan Island and collecting foreign weapons for the Burmese to lead an armed uprising against British rule. Nakano School members worked in Hainan, Guangdong, and the organ's headquarters in Thailand to lay the groundwork.

Japan's surprise attack against Great Britain in December 1941 drastically changed the operation. The Minami organ responded by establishing the Burma Independence Army (BIA) that month in Bangkok. Such Nakano School graduates as Lt. Izumiya Tatsuro then trained and led BIA units into Burma under the overall command of Lt. Gen. Iida Shojiro's 15th Army. With the conquest of Burma, the BIA grew from its initial 200 Burmese recruited in

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Fujiwara's replacement—and then by Maj. Gen. Yamamoto Hayashi.³⁰

Turning To Guerrilla Warfare

The war's outbreak so soon after the Nakano School's first class had graduated reduced its field of operations from the entire world to Japanese-occupied areas in Asia. The accelerating tempo of the Allied counterassault led the IJA to abandon all training but instruction in guerrilla tactics. The Nakano School's mission was to produce operatives who would wreak havoc behind enemy lines in the Southern Front and, in the end, lead the Japanese people in a guerrilla war in the final battle for the home islands.

The Nakano School opened its Futamata Branch for guerrilla warfare in 1944. The foreign-language classes and other training unrelated to guerrilla tactics were gone. The training period was reduced from two years to six and then three months.³¹ A central communications unit was established within IGHQ to coordinate the activities of commandos working behind enemy lines and communicate intelligence.³² In this later period, over 2,000 graduates were assigned

to outposts in the Southern Front throughout Japan, generally in the home prefectures, to organize guerrilla units.

The Nakano School was an essential part of the IJA's plans for the final defense of Japan, as indicated by the withdrawal of the main facility from suburban Nakano to Tomioka, Gunma Prefecture, in 1945. The new location, further inland among the mountains, offered greater protection than the Tokyo area. More important, the school was close to the vast underground IGHQ under construction in neighboring Matsushiro, Nagano Prefecture. The Noborito Laboratory had also withdrawn to Nagano, as had such key weapons manufacturers as Mitsubishi Heavy Industries and Toshiba.

The Nakano School thus constituted an important element in the military-industrial complex Japan was assembling to fight the final campaign in the home islands. The government exhorted the entire population to fight to the death. Even military leaders considering surrender demanded the opportunity to deal a major blow to the invading US forces before negotiating an end to the war.

The End of the School

The atomic bombing of Hiroshima on 6 August, the Soviet invasion of Manchukuo and Japan's northern islands on 9 August, and the destruction of Nagasaki by an atomic bomb the same day precipitated Japan's surrender without the climactic battle for which the IJA had been preparing. Emperor Hirohito's recorded

The Nakano School graduates worked with other members to persuade Indian officers and soldiers in the British Army to surrender. Fujiwara's organization then turned them and others detained after the fall of Singapore into the Indian National Army (INA). Nakano School officers remained core members in the expanded efforts to wrest India from British rule under the successor organs led by Iwakuro—

speech declaring an end to the war was broadcast on 15 August.

Four days earlier, the IJA had ordered Maj. Gen. Yamamoto Hayashi, the last commandant, to begin burning documents and making other preparations to close the Nakano School. On 15 August, Yamamoto assembled the school's members to listen to the broadcast. Afterwards, he ordered the torching of the campus Shinto shrine, led the assembled members in a final singing of the school song, and then dismissed them. The Nakano School had closed its doors after only seven years.³⁴

NOTES

1. Kinoshita, Kenzo. *Kiesareta Himitsu Sen Kenkyūjo* (Vanished Covert Warfare Laboratory). Nagano: Shinano Mainichi Shim bunsha; 1994; pp. 47, 66, 194-96, 5-17 (reference section).
2. All Japanese names are given in the Japanese form: surname followed by given name.
3. Kinoshita, pp. 194-99.
4. Department of Defense. Vol. 5 of *The Magic Background to Pearl Harbor*. Washington, DC; 1978; pp. 1, 3, 8, 12.
5. Imai, Takeo. *Showa No Boryaku* (Showa Plots). Tokyo: Asahi Sonorama; 1985; pp. 247-51.
6. Hata, Ikuhiko. *Showashi No Gunjintachi* (Military Men of Showa History). Tokyo: Bungei Shunju; 1989; pp. 313-15.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 317.
8. Usui later assumed command of AGS 2nd Bureau's 8th Section (Clandestine). See Kinoshita, p. 195.
9. *Ibid.*, pp. 194-99.
10. Hata, pp. 316-17.
11. Kinoshita, p. 12 (reference section)
12. Hata, pp. 317-18.
13. Meirion and Susan Harries. *Soldiers of the Sun: The Rise and Fall of the Imperial Japanese Army*. New York: Random House; 1991; p. 378.
14. Arisue, Seizo. *Shusen Hishi: Arisue Kikancho No Shuki* (Secret History of the War's End: Memoirs of the Chief of the Arisue Organ). Tokyo: Fuyo Shobo Shuppan; 1987; pp. 50-52, and Matsushima Keizo, *Chōhō Taiheiyo Senso* (Covert Intelligence War in the Pacific). Tokyo: Asahi Sonorama; 1985; p. 55.
15. Hata Ikuhiko. *Showa Tenno No Ketsudan* (The Emperor Showa's Five Decisions). Tokyo: Bunshun Bunko; 1994; p. 152, and Kinoshita, p. 197.
16. Hata, Gunjin, pp. 320-21. For a colorful history of Akashi's operations, see Toyoda Jo's *Jo no Shogun Akashi Motojiro: Roshia Wo Taoshita Supai Taisho no Shogai* (Intelligence General Akashi Motojiro: The Life of the Spy General Who Brought Down Russia). Tokyo: Kojinsha NF Bunko; 1994.
17. Kinoshita, p. 198.
18. Onoda, Hiroo. *No Surrender: My Thirty-Year War*. Trans. by Charles Terry. Tokyo: Kodansha International; 1974.
19. Ishihara, Masaie. *Mo Hitotsu No Okinawa Sen* (Another Account of the Battle for Okinawa). Naha: Okinawa Bunko; 1992; p. 50.
20. Hata, Gunjin, pp. 317-21.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 321.
22. Hori, Eizo. *Daihonei Sanbo No Joho Senki* (An IGHQ Staff Officer's Record of Intelligence Warfare).
23. Matsushima, p. 5
24. Hori, p. 77.
25. Hata, *Showa*, p. 114.
26. Izumiya, Tatsuro. *The Minami Organ*. Translated by U Tun Aung Chain. Rangoon: Universities Press; 1981; p. 14.
27. *Ibid.*, forward.
28. Imai, p. 221, and Izumiya, pp. 168-70.
29. Fujiwara, Iwaichi. *F Kikan: Japanese Army Operations in Southeast Asia During WWII*. Translated by Akashi Yoji. Hong Kong: Heinemann's Asia; 1983; p. 11, and Imai, p. 232.
30. Imai, p. 254.
31. Onoda, pp. 31-32.
32. Hata, *Showa*, p. 152.
33. Kinoshita, p. 312.
34. Arisue, pp. 114-16.